

THE BRONTËS ON THE STAGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH BLAKE MORRISON¹

ENTREVISTA COM O DRAMATURGO BLAKE MORRISON, AUTOR DA PEÇA *WE ARE THREE SISTERS*

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About the author

Blake Morrison is an English poet, anthologist, novelist, critic and playwright. He was born in Skipton, Yorkshire, in 1950, and was educated at Nottingham University before pursuing postgraduate studies in Canada and at University College in London. According to the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, he worked for the *Times Literary Supplement* between 1978 and 1981, when he was editor for both *The Observer* and *the Independent* on Sunday. Morrison is now Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Chairman to the Poetry Book Society and council member of the Poetry Society, a member of the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of England and Vice-Chairman of English PEN⁴. Since 2003 he has been Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College in the University of London.

Blake Morrison has also written non-fiction books, such as his memoir *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993), a moving narrative about his father's life and death which won the J. R. Ackerley Prize and the Esquire/Volvo/Waterstone's Non-Fiction Book Award. This biography was made into a film in 2007, directed by Anand Tucker and starring Colin Firth. A second memoir called *Things My Mother Never Told Me* was published in 2002. He is also the editor of the *Penguin Reader of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). When the matter is theatre, Blake Morrison's works are predominantly what we convey to call adaptations. He

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adapts from classical plays such as in *The Cracked Pot* (1996), an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Both *The Cracked Pot* and his version of Sophocles's *Oedipus* (2001) were produced and performed by Barrie Rutter's theatre company Northern Broadsides. The same theatre company went on to perform his version of *Antigone* in 2003 and published *Antigone* and *Oedipus* (2003) in a double volume the same year. Morrison's plays also include *The Man with Two Gaffers*, a version of Carlo Goldoni's *Il Servitore di Due Padroni*, and *Lisa's Sex Strike*, his adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which transforms the classic text into a comedy set in a Northern mill town. *Lisa's Sex Strike* toured with Northern Broadsides in 2007. His latest play is *We Are Three Sisters*, written in 2011 which is based on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

We are Three Sisters is the theme of the present interview, a theatrical work written by Blake Morrison, who chose to use Chekhov's *Three Sisters* as a shadow text, or a template. Blake Morrison has mirrored much of the dialogues, translating them to fit the specific details of life at Brontë Parsonage. He has kept the structure of *Three Sisters* as a scaffold around which he builds the story of the Brontës. Morrison merges the Brontës and Chekhov, biography and fiction, in an intricate craft, putting very different pieces and fabric scraps together to create a text play that extrapolates the boundaries of theatre, because it deals with different layers that present a piece of literature that is also a puzzle to be solved.

Morrison saw the obvious connections between the life of the Brontë sisters and Chekhov's play – the three sisters who support each other, a troubled brother with drinking problems, dead parents, the feeling of remoteness from the centre, an old servant who is also considered part of the family, and all the themes respecting culture, literature, work, women's rights, love and marriage, that are discussed both by Chekhov and by the Brontës. On February 4th, 2015 I visited Blake Morrison in his office at Goldsmith College, when he granted me a very generous interview. He was so kind as to answer my many questions concerning his play *We Are Three Sisters*. The following text is the transcription of the interview.

Interview with Blake Morrison

FRITSCH: My first question is about your choice of genre. You are a writer; you write poetry, novels and plays. Why did you choose to tell this story in drama form?

MORRISON: Good question. There is this particular theatre company I work with. I wouldn't call myself a playwright, because I have only ever translated, transposed and adapted

plays from German and Ancient Greek and always for the same theatre company based in the Northern [part] of England, not far from Haworth and the Brontë Parsonage, in Halifax. And, a friend of mine, who is the theatre critic for the *Observer* newspaper, she is called Susannah Clapp, she had seen some of these productions that I had done, and she asked me if I had ever thought about adapting Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, because it seems to me, she said, there's so much in there that reminds me of the Brontës. Well, I thought, that's an interesting idea. Then, I suggested to the director of Northern Broadsides and he agreed that it was quite interesting. So, I had to go, but I found the obstacles too big to begin with. I thought the differences between the Chekhov play and the lives of Brontës were too great, and so, for a time, I set it aside. Then, I came back to it, because he said, well, you know we should do this. And when I came back to it, I began to see ways in which I could stay truthful, in some ways true to Chekhov, to the structure of Chekhov's play, but really make it the story of the Brontës. So, for me it was never a choice – a play, a poem or a novel...no, no... It was always Chekhov. Could I use Chekhov as the framework to tell the Brontës' story?

FRITSCH: How deep was your knowledge about the Brontës' biography when you started writing the play? Also, how long did you research in order to prepare yourself?

MORRISON: Well, I'm not a Brontë scholar, or even really I was, when I began, any kind of expert. I had, of course, read *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and some of the other novels, but when I began my research, I particularly used Juliet Barker's book, that is just sitting behind you on the shelves, because it is the most detailed, and I particularly like one thing she emphasizes, I think, in her biography, actually two – one is that the Brontës were not cut off from the world, as Elizabeth Gaskell presents in her biography, but they do have an intellectual life around Haworth; and secondly, theirs was not a story only about tragedy, gloom and despair, but there was some lightness in that too. So, I found her book very helpful, and indeed I sent her a draft of the play, which she didn't like very much, because it was too far from the truth of the Brontë story. After that, I sent other drafts and I took some advice from her, and then she began to enjoy it, to like it. She also lives near Haworth and the theatre company, so she became a supporter of the play and the project. And, I also read wildly Brontë biographies, I read a lot of books, I read all the novels, I read more about Anne, because I hadn't read much her, I started, I suppose, to use some insights from the biographies, but also reading the letters and reading the novels – to take lines, sentences from those, which I thought could be representative of what Charlotte, Emily and Anne believed, thought and felt and I used in the

play some of these lines. So, the short answer is, I grew up in that part of the world, near the Brontës, I lived like they lived in the top of a village, so I also used these parallels. I was not an expert. I was just interested, like anybody could be, in them. Well, I did the research, but not like a scholar would, but as a creative writer, looking for things that I could use.

FRITSCH: My third question is about Chekhov. I mean, why Chekhov? I know you have already said that *Three Sisters* explores themes that preoccupied the Brontës, but this is a huge challenge, especially if you think about the Russian context that supports the play.

MORRISON: It did seem to me, when the idea was first suggested to me... This is too wildly, this is too ridiculous, this is too different... But, of course, it's a wonderful play and the structure of the play is a fantastic template to use anyway. And, although it is set in Russia, there are sufficient parallels to work with. So, to take one example the line everybody remembers from *Three Sisters* is "Moscow, Moscow, Moscow". So, that made me think what the Brontës relationship to London was. Well, ambivalent, I think. There's a letter that Charlotte wrote where she tells her friends who are visiting London about the wonderful and majestic things in the capital that you can see. And, of course, there is that famous trip they made to London to declare their identities to the publishers, this was Anne and Charlotte, Emily stayed behind. And they had, like anybody growing up in rural Yorkshire, like I did, we are always a little suspicious of the capital city – London. So, the attraction to the city and this slightly resistance I found interesting to explore in the relation to the Chekhov work. And, also, there are obvious connections: three sisters, a troubled artistic brother, dead parents, the feeling of remoteness from the centre, an old servant, and a lot of discussion about work, about marriage and about love. One thing I think that is in common in Chekhov's work and the Brontës is the position of women in society. In Chekhov, we see a class of women who are frustrated with the life they have, although it is a privileged life. The Brontës were also, I think, frustrated with the position of women in society, but, of course, the great difference was that they worked. They worked so hard. They worked so hard in order to accomplish their duties and their writing work. So, although there are similarities in the position of women in society, the way they address the matter is not the same.

FRITSCH: You mentioned Juliet Barker's *The Brontës* in the introduction of the printed copy of the play. And, I ask how important was this book to your writing? You have already talked about this, but is there anything you would like to add?

MORRISON: Well, there are specific things that I remember, for instance, on the question of how cut off were the Brontës from the intellectual society and the world, which is what Elizabeth Gaskell suggests. Juliet Barker emphasizes how active they were in going to libraries and how active they actually were. These are the sort of details I was able to use. She also tells the story about a huge storm, a catastrophe that happened when the Brontës were young; houses were destroyed, and so on. I realize that would be an opportunity to account for a problem I had in act three that in Chekhov's play there is a fire. Locally, it is a disaster and people are helping, the sisters are helping, and I worried how to deal with this, because there was no equivalent fire in Haworth. But the storm, as collected by Juliet Barker, helped me to find an equivalent for the fire, the destruction in a local community, the sisters helping to solve the problem. So, I found Juliet Barker's the most useful book that I did look at, and it was from Elizabeth Gaskell that I really got the image, that is very important in the production of the play, perhaps not so much in the text, that is the three sisters walking around the table, talking at night after their father had gone to bed. That really came from Gaskell.

FRITSCH: What about the Brontës' literary works? You told me you had read all the novels. Did they help you to construct your own text, or in which ways did the novels affect you and your writing?

MORRISON: They didn't affect the structure, but they affected lines. I was able to grasp, in particular, I think, ideas about love and marriage and romance. There are a lot of lines in the novels on these subjects from all the three writers, really. So, I was able to take sentences from the novels and use them in the play. I also took sentences from the letters, particularly Charlotte's, and put them in the play. I took a very moving thing that Anne must... I think it must have been a letter that Anne wrote when she knows she is in danger of dying, it was in the end of her life, and she says "I'm not afraid of dying, but there are so many things I want to do, so many projects, so many things I want to achieve, this is why I don't want to die." This was in the very end of my play that I wrote some lines to Anne addressing this issue. So, from the novels and from the letters I was able to take some ideas and lines, but there is another play by Polly Teale, and she has done a play about the Brontës, not to do with Chekhov, and she steps out of the story of the Brontës turning Charlotte to Jane Eyre, or Emily turning to Cathy. Suddenly, the real-life characters become fictional characters, and this is the fantasy element of Teale's play. I didn't want to do that. I stayed close to Chekhov, the realist play, and I didn't

approach the novels in Teale's way. I approached the novels using some ideas and some words actually used. I mean, just to give you one more example, in *Jane Eyre* there is a point when Jane says to Rochester "do you think I am an automaton, without feelings?", and I thought this could be used in the play. And, when we had a rehearsal, back there in the parsonage, it was full of Brontë fans and admirers and scholars, and during the cocktail reception, one of them came to me and said "well, I enjoyed it, but the language seems wrong, for instance that word automaton, no one would say automaton in the 19th century." And then I said: "But it is in *Jane Eyre*".

FRITSCH: Well, you are actually answering my questions in advance. In Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Moscow is a symbol of what Olga, Irina and Masha want and can never get. In *We Are Three Sisters*, you use London instead of Moscow; do you think that works in the same way? Do you think London would be the Brontë's Moscow?

MORRISON: Well, you make a good point, in the Chekhov, they were in Moscow at first, and that is very different from the Brontës, who had no earlier attachment to London. But, anybody in Yorkshire, and it would be the same today; the city has still a sort of glamour about it. Although the Brontës being kind of puritanical and their resistance to the superficiality associated with London society, another part of them was called by the capital. More important, perhaps, they were dependent of London if they wanted their works to get published. London was, you know, where books were published, and they had ambitions to be writers. So, they had to have a relationship to London to become published writers. And, later in life, after Anne and Emily died, Charlotte spent some time in London. Of course, she was not a member of London society, but she got to know a little bit of it. But the key point was the trip, when Charlotte and Anne decided to go and be honest with their publishers: "We are not men called Bell, we are women called Brontë". This is beautifully described in Elizabeth Gaskell's biography, and it is very detailed in Juliet Barker, talking about the trains they got, the places where they stayed, the publishers who were shocked, how they introduce themselves, and when they got back, how Emily was disgusted because she wanted to remain anonymous, and now the publishers knew they were women. Well, that scene had to be added, there's nothing like that in Chekhov, and thinking about the title of the play, this is where *We Are Three Sisters* come from. I felt I had to include that scene, because it was such a good dramatic scene. The other thing, and sorry it is not part of your question, but think about the problems of transposing Chekhov: Masha, as the Emily figure, is married; the Branwell figure is also married, so I had

to change that obviously. Branwell is interesting, because he had this affair with this woman, Mrs Robinson, and she became the equivalent of Natasha. The three sisters resist to Natasha as the Brontës resist to Mrs Robinson. The problem I had was because of the staging of my play, it all takes place in the Parsonage, so the trip to London publishers is related, recounted, and a similar thing happens to Branwell, because I couldn't have Branwell in Mrs Robinson's house. I had to get Mrs Robinson in the Parsonage, what actually never happened, in reality she never came. Of course, it was highly implausible in reality, but that is fiction.

FRITSCH: When we approach the play, we see that you have used Chekhov as a kind of scaffold to bring this version of *Three Sisters*. For instance, Olga is Charlotte, Masha is Emily and Irina is Anne, so I would like you to comment on how you made the connections considering their personalities. Olga and Charlotte are quite similar in many ways, but what about Emily and Anne? How does it work for you to make these connections and establish the parallels?

MORRISON: I think there are parallels, but for me what was very important in the end was the fact that the Brontës should be like what we understand the three Brontë sisters to be. If they don't correspond exactly to the three sisters in Chekhov, so be it. The more important is that they be recognizable, the older sister as the controlling one, the rational one, the keeper of the reputation of the other two; Emily a bit wild and sort of lonely; Anne, the baby, being sometimes resentful of being the youngest. Well, I don't pretend the portrayal of the three sisters is new, because I had already so much work transposing Chekhov. I didn't want to do any radical interpretation, like taking the Brontës and presenting them in a very different way from what the audience expect. There is this book, that I read during my research, which says that Emily must have had problems similar to anorexia, this is Catherine Frank's book. However, I was not interested in any radical new interpretation, I want people to feel like "Oh yeah, that's Charlotte, that's Emily, that's Anne, that's how I always thought them." Undoubtedly there are parallels, but in the end, the key thing was to be like the three Brontë sisters as we know them.

FRITSCH: Chekhov's three sisters were orphans, but the Brontës were not. How important was this fact in the construction of these characters in your play?

MORRISON: Well, the beginning of the Chekhov play includes nostalgia, remembering the father who was dead; the Brontë father, Patrick, lived more than all his

children, so there's no parallel. But, the mother had died, and the two oldest sisters had died and it seems to me quite possible that the Brontë sisters would have memories and sad memories of their mother and their lost sisters, so in the beginning of my play is not the remembering of the father, it is the remembering of the mother. In Chekhov, this is taking place in a name day, and I had it as a birthday – what is quite different for Russian culture. They were not orphans, but they had lost their mother, so I found correspondence on that.

FRITSCH: You also said in the introduction of the printed edition of *We Are Three Sisters* that the Brontë story is usually shrouded in darkness and misery, and that your play tries to disperse the gloom and to highlight resilience instead. And then, this is just food for thought, but don't you think that Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is as gloomy as what we are used to think about the Brontës' lives? I mean, why did you choose a play like this to work as a shadow text if your intention was to let in a little lightness, as you also said before?

MORRISON: Yeah! You could say there's a gloom surrounding the *Three Sisters*, the end is tragic. But even Chekhov thought of it as a tragicomedy and he called it a tragicomedy, and there is humour there, there is a lot of humour. It perhaps comes more from the men in the play than the three sisters (Olga, Irina and Masha). It wasn't such a stretch to use that play, because there is lightness in Chekhov, and I wanted the Brontës to have this same lightness to. So, I think it was perfectly okay to use Chekhov as comedy and tragedy, as both took part in the life of the Brontës.

FRITSCH: This question is particularly important to me. My PhD dissertation analyses some images offered by *We Are Three Sisters*, highlighting their symbolic potential. In some passages you talk about kinds of flowers and compare some characters to flowers, and I would like to know if this was intentional or just a product of your poetic approach to writing.

MORRISON: It's interesting, but I hadn't thought about this very much. Of course, as you can see if you ever go to Haworth and the Parsonage, beyond the moors, you become very conscious of natural world around you and the variety of different flowers and birds there. When you grow up in a place like this, and I did, you become very conscious of nature, birds and flowers and animal life and trees. The Brontës used to walk on the moors; Emily in special had this passionate love for natural life. So, I don't think I have rationally emphasized birds or flowers; it's just the landscape and part of growing up in a place like that.

FRITSCH: I read in a previous interview that you don't consider yourself a playwright. Can I ask you why?

MORRISON: Well, because I always work with an existent text. Actually, I think this is the nearest I would come to calling myself a playwright, because there's so much involved in crafting and inventing a play. I did have what you called a scaffold. I had the scaffold of the original play. And that is the same when I work with *Antigone*, *Lisa's Sex Strike* and all my other plays. I always use the original to work in transposition. I think *We Are Three Sisters* could be my most radical transposition.

FRITSCH: What about the genre of the play. You said you are fond of realism and that you wanted to stay close to Chekhov's realism. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MORRISON: I wasn't interested in transposing scenes from the fiction. I wanted this story was the story of the Brontës' lives. It wasn't an adaptation of a novel. I wasn't trying to conflate Charlotte and Jane, Emily and Cathy. No. I was telling the story of the sisters' real lives. I wanted it to seem a plausible realistic version of their lives, and that is a tradition Chekhov is also working – Realism. So, it's not surreal, it's not fabulist and it's not an allegory; it's a realist drama.

FRITSCH: The contemporary British theatre is a complex web. I mean, it is composed of artistic and aesthetic purposes sharing the same spot. There are names like Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, John Osborne, and Sarah Kane, who represent a different approach to theatre, far away from what Chekhov did. What is your opinion about this clash of aesthetic views? Do you think there is still room for realism in the British stage? And how does your work interact with the contemporary scene?

MORRISON: Well, I think it might be seen as an old-fashioned play, especially because the subject that matters is the early 19th century, the setting and so on. On the other hand, you could say it is also metafictional or postmodernist to the extent that I am working from original texts transposing and reinventing them. Reinventing and reinterpreting an original text. One of the first plays to make an impression on me was Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The idea of them stepping outside Shakespeare's play and talking about

things, a minor character being brought to the centre of the stage, for me it was great. It is a kind of game, working with an original text, and trying to do something with that original text, you know, from a different context. So, I don't know how my plays fit really to contemporary British drama. As I said, I don't even consider myself a playwright but a poet and novelist. So, I never really thought about my relationship to contemporary British theatre. One thing that I should add is – because I work with this particular theatre company and director, Barrie Rutter, who is currently rehearsing *King Lear*, and he has demands and prejudices about what theatre must be. First of all, authentic colloquial speech; it was important the Brontë sisters to sound like people living in the early 19th century Yorkshire; they have those accents; they use the idioms of that time. Secondly, simple realist setting; no videos, no fancy lighting effects, and also a high importance to English proper pronunciation. The way educated people would speak at those times; delivering the text and the language properly. Rutter believes a lot of drama schools are not preparing the actors to deliver the text properly; people don't deliver lines like they should. So, he focusses on that; he focusses on clarity. If you go to a Northern Broadsides production, you hear every word. And this is wonderful for the writer, because the audience is going to hear every word. So, I think working with him and his company was also an influence on my writing of plays; knowing exactly what he was expecting and what he wanted to do probably influenced the play.

(End of Interview)